

Martin Hocke

Am An Owl

Novel



For Nicole Hocke

*And with many thanks to
Jenny Picton and Pauline Hocke
without whose help etc.*

Part One

... In the reign
of the chicken owl comes like
a god.
Flown wind in the skin. Fine
rain in the bones. Owl breaks
like the day. Am an owl, am an owl.

GEORGE MACBETH

Owl

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

St MATTHEW Chapter V

Verse 5

I see the barley moving, as the mowers find their pace
I see the line advancing, with a steady timeless grace
And there's passion in their eyes and there's honour in their face
As they scythe down the castles and the courts

JOHN TAMS

Scarecrow

Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of
heaven

St Matthew Chapter V

Verse 10

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.
And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Heaven Haven

Chapter 1

Olmo was born in no man's land. He first saw the pink light of dawn in the abandoned railway carriage which his parents had some time ago adopted as their home.

The old carriage stood in a small siding near a village railway station which had long lapsed into disuse. The iron tracks were rusty, the sleepers were rotting and the windows of the carriage and of the nearby station were all either cracked or broken. His parents fed him well, taught him to fly and presently to hunt alone, in the scrubland beside the iron tracks and later in the outlying gardens of the small village that had once been served by the now deserted station. As he grew stronger, his father took him farther along the iron tracks, right up to the outskirts of the small town that lay about twenty meadows to the south of their home in the abandoned railway carriage.

Few owls would have considered the carriage or this particular stretch of no man's land as a fertile territory, much less as a desirable residence, but in the beginning Olmo was not aware of this and so he didn't care. On the contrary, the early part of his life was filled with the thrill of discovery.

As he winged his way along the iron tracks in the heavily scented summer nights, flew back in the early springtime dawn, or set out hunting in the pungent autumn twilight the sight and smell of white campion, cow parsley, wild parsnip or silverweed seemed to him as pretty and as fragrant as the wild rose, hyacinth, wood anemone or a host of other flowers and blossom he had never known.

Then, growing swiftly through adolescence to the state of a fully fledged young male, he became increasingly aware of the vast meadowland that lay to the west and of the deep, dark woods that rolled high above the disused station and the tiny village, towering above everything to the east of the iron tracks.

For some unknown reason, the woodland tempted him especially, though he knew that he must never attempt to fly there for fear of the mighty Tawny landlords, who would kill him on sight for trespassing. He had been told that it would be fatal to approach the rich, rolling woodland by night and even a daytime expedition would be dangerous, though daylight was said to fill the fierce Tawnies with a strange kind of lethargy, severely reducing their powers of flight.

In the beginning, Olmo accepted confinement to no man's land without question or complaint. But as he grew up, his young soul began to rebel against the unnatural limits that had been imposed on him. What right did the Tawnies have to all that land, and why should the

big Barn Owl birds dominate the fields and meadows — farmland that teemed with good things to eat, such as vole, field mouse and especially the succulent and juicy mole?

His father had explained nothing but merely warned him not to fly beyond the confines of the no man's land where they belonged. The reason he found out by accident, one spring day when he had flown back through the broken window of their ancient carriage, exhausted in the early dawn and fallen asleep at once on his perch on top of the luggage rack above the torn upholstery of the seats below him — seats on which humans had once sat and travelled up and down the iron tracks.

Of course, Olmo did not know this at the time, neither was he ever to remember exactly what sound tore him from his deepest sleep as the now fully risen sun streamed in through the broken windows of the carriage, causing him to blink and then close his eyes against the blinding light. Awake, he heard his parents arguing.

'You fuss too much,' his father was saying. 'Especially over Olmo. You interfere too much with both of them. It is a bad habit from the old country. To survive here they must be independent — and the sooner the better!'

'But they are still so young,' Rosalba protested. 'Especially Olmo! It's different for Eda. She is older, and as a female she is naturally less adventurous. But Olmo shows signs of wanting to explore. I think it's time we told him about the real dangers — and the reasons for them. I think it's time to tell him that we are aliens.'

'The truth can wait a while!' said Pietro. 'Let him enjoy his early youth. Let him learn of these things in his own way. Olmo is no fool. He already knows the territory well and hunts like any adult. When the time comes, I will tell him. But not before! If you begin to talk about our history and the dangers when Little Owls are too young, it scares and inhibits them. You must not teach them to live in fear, or else they will become afraid of fear itself! Let him grow up to be strong and confident — and with a sense of belonging. When the time comes, I will tell him. But not yet. You explained things to Eda much too early. Look at the effect it's had on her! It's turning her into a religious maniac!'

'There are worse things than that,' said Rosalba defensively.

'Like getting a disease, or being dead, perhaps,' said Pietro, with a contemptuous little snort. 'I've told you, it's a fault our ancestors brought here from the old country. Too much suspicion and too much parental projection. Now, for the great God Bird's sake, let me sleep. It's almost high noon and I am tired!'

This was the longest speech that Olmo had ever heard his father make, except of course when he waxed eloquent about his passion for the old language. On all other occasions he was a

stocky, silent bird — now tiring with the onset of middle age. He was an owl who used few words, but measured every one of them and for this reason Olmo was fascinated by what he had just heard — so fascinated that for a long time he could not get to sleep. What was an alien, he wondered, as the sun still climbed and reached its noon time height above the carriage. What was an alien, and why was history so important to their kind? His father would not tell him, so he decided to ask Eda when she awoke at twilight. Though his sister was a rather dowdy creature who spent much time praying to the God Bird, she had a good brain — or so Olmo thought — and because of her greater age she knew things that he did not.

At dusk he would take her with him to the secret hideout he had found on the very limits of the narrow stretch of no man's land where they were confined to live, move and have their being. He would fly with her to the outskirts of the village where they would perch together in his favourite place — the roof of an abandoned shed from which you could see across the copse and up into the rolling woodland hills which he so longed to penetrate and explore.

'I do feel strong and confident already,' he thought, remembering his father's words. 'I am no fool and I will learn from my sister what to be an alien means. And about our history, too. For the purpose within me forms to fly some day beyond the narrow confines of no man's land, explore the wider world and meet these owls of other races — to find out for myself why we are afraid.'

Having made this bold resolve, the young Olmo tucked his head below one wing and slept at last, waiting for the night and new adventures to begin. He slept, little knowing how soon he would meet an owl of another species, and how deeply that encounter would influence the rest of his natural life.

Chapter 2

'I don't like this place,' said Eda, with a little shudder, as she perched beside Olmo on the roof of the crumbling shack, staring out in the twilight towards the Tawny forest that stretched above them through the darkening hills.

'Why not?' asked Olmo, feeling offended and slightly hurt at his sister's reaction to his secret hideout.

'It's dangerous,' she said.

'Why?' asked Olmo. 'As far as I can tell, you seem to think that danger lies everywhere.'

'And so it does!' said Eda with another little shiver. 'Danger lurks around us all the time, but especially here, in this last wedge of no man's land that stretches out into the Barn Owl

meadows and borders on the foothills of the Tawny woods. We could easily be killed here by one of either species.’

‘But why?’ asked Olmo, who had already asked his sister what the word alien meant and was waiting impatiently for her reply.

‘Because they are indigenous, and we are not.’

‘What does indigenous mean?’

‘It means they come from here. It means they have lived in these territories for many thousand springs — and we have not. We are newcomers, unwanted immigrants. If they catch us on their land, they will kill us for trespassing.’

‘But why? If we don’t take their food, why can’t we fly across their land.’

‘Because we are aliens.’

‘But you haven’t told me yet what alien means!’

‘It means different, or unwanted,’ said Eda, shuddering again. ‘Now, please let’s get out of here and back to the heart of no man’s land — back beside the iron tracks.’ Having said this, she spread her round, blunted wings ready for take off, then hesitated and turned back to her little brother. ‘Well, are you coming too?’ she asked sounding both impatient and afraid.

‘No,’ Olmo answered, shaking his head as he stared out through the last of the fading light and up towards the forest that was now all but swallowed up in darkness. ‘No,’ he repeated. ‘I think I’ll just stay here a while and see what happens.’

‘Goodbye then, and don’t say I didn’t warn you!’

With these ominous words Eda took off and flew as fast as she could back towards the iron tracks and their own stretch of no man’s land. Olmo watched her bouncing flight — that up and dipping motion so typical of Little Owls — until she vanished in the ever deepening twilight.

After she had disappeared from sight he sat for a long time on the roof of the ruined shack, on the very edge of no man’s land, and watched the moon rise above the dark, wooded hills in front of him. For a long time he perched there in utter silence, listening to the throbbing night and feeling a thrill born of fear and excitement begin to tingle deep inside him.

Suddenly he heard a vole move in the abandoned, overgrown grass below him. Olmo took off, hovered, dived, killed the creature cleanly and carried it back at once to the crumbling roof of his secret hideout.

‘This is the life,’ he thought, when he had polished off this delicious and substantial breakfast. ‘These are the places to be in — places at the extremes of being. I don’t care what my sister says. The odd vole you catch beside the iron tracks is nothing like so juicy as the one

that I've just eaten. Flimsy, scraggy little things they are, by comparison. That was fresh, country food and the meadowland must be seething with vole and mole for the great white owls to get fat on. One day, when I get older, I'm going to make an expedition there. If the Barn Owls and the Tawnies can hunt in our territory, then why shouldn't I go poaching in what they consider to be theirs?'

This rebellious line of thinking was suddenly shattered by a hideous hissing and shrieking from the now darkened meadow to the west of him. At this frightful cacophony of sound, Olmo froze with fear and gripped the roof tightly with his talons. Before he had begun to recover from the shock, the bloodcurdling hunting cry split the night air again, only this time the shrieks emanated from closer to his secret hideout. Though he had never yet heard or seen one, Olmo knew instinctively that this must be a Barn Owl. What would he do if it sensed his presence and flew up to challenge him?

On a sudden, the extremes of being seemed much less attractive to him and the tingle of excitement that he'd felt before now turned into a total and petrifying chill of fear. In panic and dismay, he realised that his bill had begun to chatter and the whole of his body had gone numb with fear.

'I can't escape!' he realised, as the icy panic spread instantly to freeze his legs and wings. 'I'm so scared now that I can't even fly away!'

Then he heard the ear splitting shriek of the hunting cry again, though this time it came from further to the west. He perched rigid on the roof and waited until he heard it once again, though this time it was still more muted by distance and had a dying fall that reverberated faintly in the darkness, hanging suspended somewhere above the earth and below the moonlight and the stars.

Olmo waited for a while until the numbness of panic melted from his belly and his bones. He sensed the blood and feeling come slowly coursing back through his limbs and wings. Then, though still weak with fear, he took off and flew back unsteadily towards the iron tracks. The closer he got to them and to his home in the disused railway carriage, the more his strength and confidence returned. But with this flush of reborn courage there came also a sense of shame. 'What a coward I've been,' he confessed to himself as he hit the iron tracks, turned and began to fly north at midnight above the rusty rails and rotting sleepers, bordered on either side by wasteland where the only poor flower that blew in the darkness was the muted pink of common rose bay willow herb.

'I should have had the courage to resist — to wait for that dreadful hunting cry to die away and then fly out over Barn Owl territory and poach myself a midnight lunch of mole,' he

thought. But instead Olmo flew away, escaping back to the mediocrity of this narrow stretch of barren land, which Tawny and Barn Owl would snub, snob and fly on above, an immigrants' ghetto where they would not deign to sojourn and whose humble flora and fauna they would despise as weed and carrion compared to the abundance of trees, flowers and wildlife in the rich wood and meadowlands where they were privileged to live.

To punish himself for what he considered to be his cowardice, Olmo decided to explore further north along the iron tracks than he had ever flown before. Though he had met a family of Little Owls who lived twenty meadows distance south — just before the outskirts of the little town — and another — the famous Del Bosco family — who lived only ten meadows to the west, he made up his mind this night to fly much farther in that direction to where hearsay had it that there were more immigrants residing in a hollow tree close to another village and the next disused, northbound station on the iron tracks.

Pausing only at midnight to appease his hungry young belly with a mouthful of bitter tasting shrew, Olmo flew on above his own deserted railway siding and then north along the line until he had travelled beyond Del Bosco's home close to the next abandoned station and found himself travelling through what was for him unknown and uncharted territory, though below him the iron tracks still stretched north and the poor rose bay willow herb flowering beneath him was a constant reminder that he had not strayed beyond the borders of no man's land.

In the small hours of early morning Olmo's wings tired and one part of him longed to turn and head back to the familiarity and safety of his home. Yet some congenital curse, an ancient pride — some inborn identity, perhaps, derived from the old language and the old country — drove him onwards through the night, up to and beyond the borders he had crossed before.

'The old language!' he thought, flogging his rounded wings still harder in the never ending flight. 'Why is my father so obsessed with it? What use is it to us, anyway? We live here now, and not in the old country. Why should I have to learn that *'Nemo profeta in patria sua'* means that a prophet shall have no honour in his own land, when I know that anyway? Why must I study a dead language? What use is it to me to know that our ancestors once said *'Cogito ergo sum'*, I think therefore I am. I know I am! I am an owl! Alien or not, I feel it in my skin and bones and I know that in the reign of the chicken, owl comes like a god. I bet they couldn't say that in the old language. Am an owl, am an owl,' he thought, and was thinking when the scream of pain and terror rose up from below him and split the still night air through which he flew.

Instinctively, Olmo dived downwards towards the source of the spine chilling scream and soon saw that it came from a disused station by the iron tracks — a building similar to the one near the siding and his own home in the abandoned railway carriage.

As Olmo homed in, regardless of his own safety, a second scream came from within the abandoned building. From the tortured voice he could tell that a female Little Owl was being murdered or molested by man or some other dreadful creature. Oblivious of his own safety and motivated by some primeval instinct, Olmo flung himself through the remaining layers of night sky below him and plunged into the disused railway station through what had once been both ticket office and waiting room and into a small back room from where the bloodcurdling screams had come.

A horrid sight then met his eyes. The scream had indeed come from a female of his species, who now dangled a few feet in front of him, clutched in the talons of a huge, puffed up and flamboyantly groomed white owl. In the confined space of what had once been the station master's office, the great white bird seemed even more enormous, but in spite of the dreadful sight which confronted him, this time Olmo's belly, wings and limbs did not freeze with terror. Instead his fear and anger converted at once into adrenalin and drove him blindly into a suicide attack.

With a terrifying battle cry he hurled himself at the great white bird, who at once let the little female go, dropping her a foot or so onto what had once been the station master's desk. Though only just over half the Barn Owl's size, Olmo got in first, driving both talons into the creature's inflated chest, only to perceive at once that his adversary's plumage was so abundant and well brushed that his deadly attack had barely scratched the plump torso beneath the well cared for feathers.

Ducking away at once, Olmo avoided the feeble flapping of talons — a half hearted attempt at an effeminate slap rather than the devastating hacking he had expected. Wheeling in the narrow office space to attack again, Olmo became aware of two things at once, with the instant glimpse of vision that comes to an owl who is engaged in mortal combat. First, he realised that his sharp little talons had barely drawn blood on his adversary's chest, and almost simultaneously he saw that the great white bird was as terrified as Olmo was himself.

'Stop!' the big owl cried, as Olmo hesitated for a mere split second. 'This whole thing is a mistake. I can explain it.'

Olmo looked into the white bird's eyes and what he saw there confirmed that his opponent was afraid. Then, for the first time, he glanced down at the little female he had come to save.

She had struggled to a sitting position on the desk, but one wing had been partially separated from her body by a flapping blow from the Barn Owl's random talons.

'Why have you done this?' Olmo demanded, as he hovered in the air above and within striking distance of the big frightened bird.

'It was a mistake!' the Barn Owl said. 'She flew in here — into my inner sanctum — completely unannounced. How was I to know her intentions were not hostile? All right, I will admit that I panicked. But so did she!'

'I didn't!' said the young female, who by this time was perching upright on the desk, hugging herself with one undamaged wing to hold and support the other. 'I heard a noise in here and came in to investigate. I thought it might be a large moth, or something else that I could eat. I live close by and come here often. How could I possibly have known that you were here?'

'Well, I'm sorry,' said the large white owl, reluctantly. 'I didn't mean to hurt you, but I'm sensitive and easily startled. As the Bard Owl, I suppose I have to be.'

'Have to be what?' asked Olmo, who was still ready to fight and also very worried about the sickening injury to the little female's wing. 'Do you have to be sensitive, or startled? And what is a Bard Owl, anyway?'

'I am a poet,' said the big white owl, puffing up his ruffled feathers with a show of pomp, or what he would have considered to be dignity. 'I am the Bard Owl on our local council, and as such I am responsible for composing ballads to divert the Barn Owl population and also for rendering history — both past and present — into art. When this unfortunate creature flew into my room, I was composing a ballad about the war we had three hundred springs ago with the Tawnies. When I've finished, it will be an epic, but what with the research and with the technique required, it's going to be a long, hard job, believe you me. That's why I came here, to get the peace and quiet that a poet needs. Obviously I can't have birds like you flying in and out at random. It disturbs the flow of my creative thought.'

'But as a Barn Owl, what are you doing here?' asked Olmo, his aggression now even more tempered by concern for the young female and her badly injured, semi severed wing. 'This is no man's land. You have a right to field, farm and meadow all around. Why usurp from us the miserable, barren stretch of territory to which we are entitled?'

'You don't understand,' the pompous white owl replied, his well produced voice now beginning to boom as his composure and confidence returned in the belief that Olmo would not attempt to attack him again. In fact Olmo had now flown down and perched on the desk opposite to him, next to the wounded Little Owl, concern for her taking priority over the desire

to inflict further damage on the much bigger Barn Owl who for some weird reason had chosen to desert his fertile territory to come and live in no man's land.

'You don't understand,' the Bard Owl repeated. 'As a poet and musician, I can't just live anywhere. To sustain and enhance my image, I need a domain that is different. Not trendy, of course, but something that has character and is genuinely special. That's why I chose this place. As far as I know, none of my species has ever lived in or on a building of this kind before.'

'What is image?' asked Olmo, after glancing at the female of his species, who was clutching her injured wing with the one that was still whole.

'Image? Oh, of course, you wouldn't know that, would you? You are an immigrant and as such it would be most unlikely for any of you to have one.'

'Tell me what it means,' insisted Olmo.

'Oh,' said the Bard Owl, with a flamboyant wave of one well groomed wing. 'It means the way that other owls perceive of one. I mean, it's about projecting the picture of oneself with which one wishes to be identified.'

Olmo did not reply at once, but looked again at the small wounded bird who perched beside him. He knew that he must get her home soon before the injured wing began to stiffen and she would no longer be able to fly. Turning away from the female of his species, he looked back hard and long at the big white bird now preening his feathers as he sat inflated and plume perched on the desk opposite to him.

'Am an owl!' he said, at length, having thought as deeply and connected as much as his untried young brain would permit him.

'Am an owl?' said the bigger bird, slightly worried now by the firm, clear eyes of the little alien who sat in front of him.

'Am an owl!' repeated Olmo. 'Am an owl like you, or like any other and from now on that shall be my image.'

The big white owl stared back at Olmo, with his mouth hanging slackly open in surprise.

'What an interesting concept!' he said, eventually. 'An unsubtle, primitive message, perhaps, but certainly one that is strong, clear and not without a certain dignity. Tell me, what is your name?'

'Olmo, and yours?'

'Bardic.'

'Bardic? Is that part of your image too?'

‘I suppose I must confess it is,’ the poet replied, after some slight hesitation — a pause during which he deigned for the first time to look at the little female he had wounded. At the sight of her injury, he winced and for the first time Olmo had the feeling that although this puffed up bird struck him as weak and vain, he might not be as wicked as at first sight he had seemed. ‘To tell you the truth, my parents called me Dogwood, but as soon as I left home I changed my name. As you know, Dogwood is merely a suckling shrub, which forms large thickets. Not at all the sort of name or association for one who knows that someday he is to become a major poet.’

Olmo stared at Bardic for a moment or two without replying. Then he turned to the little female. ‘And what’s your name?’ he asked her gently.

‘Lily,’ she answered, with a brave smile that was meant to mask her fear and pain. With Olmo present, she was no longer afraid of Bardic, but the hurt in her wing was getting worse and now, after the initial, numbing shock, she was beginning to worry about the long term consequences — not just the scars, but the laming effect a wound like hers might leave.

‘I’ll take you home,’ said Olmo. ‘If we don’t go now, the wound may cause your wing to stiffen, making it difficult to fly.’

‘I can feel it beginning now,’ said Lily, with a nod and another little smile.

‘Is it far?’ asked Olmo, trying to sound casual and to conceal the deep concern he felt at the extent of the damage to the little creature’s wing.

‘Not far,’ said Lily, shaking her head and inadvertently wincing once again as she was racked by a fresh spasm of pain. ‘We live in a large, hollow elm, about two meadows to the north of here.’

‘I say, do come back and let me know when you are better,’ said Bardic, who now watched in what seemed like genuine concern as Lily tried to stretch her damaged limb in a painful attempt at take off. ‘And you, too, Olmo,’ he added. ‘Do drop in again. We must all look upon what happened as an accident. I want you to know that there are no hard feelings on my part, even though I fear that the shock will prevent me from composing a single thing, at least until the moon has changed.’

‘Goodbye, Bardic — or Dogwood,’ said Olmo, with a grim backward glance at the big white bird. ‘But just remember one thing, will you?’

‘And what might that be?’ asked the Bard Owl, sounding both offended and defensive.

‘Just remember that no man’s land may not be so good for your image as you think!’

With this warning, Olmo turned and followed Lily’s limping flight through the gap where a door had once been and out through the long abandoned waiting room, across the cracked

platform through which weeds were now growing, and then northwards along the iron tracks through the dark but living night.

Lily flew slowly, gasping from time to time in pain. Not far beyond the abandoned station, which Bardic had now claimed and converted to his seat of learning, she crashed down from the sky and lay twitching in pain and exhaustion on a sparse bed of rose bay willow herb which had somehow fought its way through the duller weeds that sprouted in the wasteland on either side of the iron tracks.

Olmo landed beside her at once and was filled with fear and compassion as he saw the blood oozing from her semi severed wing and the mist that glazed her once bright eyes — a film projected by the throbbing pain.

‘You must take off again!’ he insisted, trying to sound calm and collected as he watched the blood drip slowly from the torn place between her body and her wing, staining the meagre bed of flowers from dark pink to a mottle of mauve and sticky crimson. ‘You must try,’ he added, attempting to sound firm, but gentle. ‘You must try to get back to your hollow tree, where you can rest and get well.’

‘I will try,’ said Lily. ‘But this bed of willow herb is soft, and from here I can see the sky — I can see the moon and the stars. It would be a good place to die.’

‘You are not going to die,’ said Olmo, surprised at how strong and confident he sounded, when in actual fact he was racked by a rising panic at the thought of having to sit here all night until the little soul expired. ‘You are not going to die,’ he repeated, again amazed to hear how calm and reasonable he sounded. ‘You are going to make a final effort. You are going to take off again and fly home.’

Lily sighed and tried to smile at him. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’ll try.’ Suiting action to her words, she raised both wings and struggled to get airborne. The cry of agony she uttered as she first flapped the badly damaged wing made Olmo gasp and wince as if at least a part of the pain had been deferred to his own strong, healthy limb. But somehow — though flying low and lame above the iron tracks and threatening in her stunted flight to crash down again at any moment — somehow Lily made it to within striking distance of the great, hollow elm tree which stood alone a mere quarter meadow’s distance to the west of the iron tracks.

Across this final quarter meadow she sobbed unashamedly with the throbbing hurt and Olmo’s immense relief as they flew in through the heart shaped entrance to the great hollow tree was tempered with fear for her survival as he saw the blood welling dark against the night sky from the wound between her body and her half severed wing.

As he perched beside her deep inside the safety of the hollow elm, Olmo saw that the blood had now seeped all down one side of her, saturating and clogging the pretty feathers, dripping now like sap into the body of the ancient tree, as if to infuse the heart of the dying mammoth elm with new life.

‘Do you live here alone?’ asked Olmo, feeling that he must at all costs preserve an outer air of calm and must on no account transmit to her his fear that she might bleed to death and his sickening premonition that the injured wing would never mend.

‘No,’ gasped Lily, and then paused to draw breath again. ‘I live here with my parents,’ she continued, after struggling to settle into a more comfortable position. ‘They must be out hunting now, but will soon come back. You have to go!’ she added, after another involuntary cry of pain. ‘If you don’t leave now, you won’t get home till after dawn.’

‘I don’t care,’ Olmo said. ‘I’ll stay with you till they come back.’

‘No,’ Lily insisted, shaking her head and looking up at him with eyes that were now clearer as the pain caused by her forced fight began slowly to abate, as did the flow of blood from her throbbing wound.

Olmo looked at her and thought hard for a while. If he risked his life by staying and flying back by daylight, Lily might realise how badly she was injured and be killed by the fear of dying or, as he’d heard his father say, by the fear of fear itself. If, on the other hand, he left her and she bled to death, how would he ever forgive himself?

‘Listen!’ he said, eventually. ‘You’re going to be all right. You will bleed a bit more and for some time you’ll be in pain, but the wound will begin to heal and eventually you’ll be able to fly again. But for the rest of the night, I’d rather stay here. You see, it’s really too late for me already to get back home before the dawn. But I’m not worried about you, so I’ll get out of this comfortable belly of the elm and sleep out in the open, on one of the upper branches — or even on the ground outside. If the nomad owls can do it, why can’t we?’

‘Go now!’ said Lily, firmly. ‘And sometime, if you can, come back and see me. You saved my life. I think you are the bravest bird I’ve ever met, but I don’t want your death upon my conscience. You are right, I shall get well! And when I am well I want to remember you the way you were tonight. Not dead! Not cut down in daylight by a buzzard or a sparrow hawk!’

Olmo looked at her for quite some time and then made the big decision.

‘All right, I’ll go now,’ he said. ‘But I’ll be back to see you tomorrow night — and every night until you’re well.’

‘Come sometimes,’ Lily said. ‘Just once or twice. Just so I know you are alive and not dead. For me, that will be sufficient.’

So reluctantly, Olmo left the wounded little creature there, eased his way out of the hollow tree and flew the thirty meadows distance back above the iron tracks, reaching the disused railway carriage as the sun scarred the night sky with the first red stripes of rising dawn.

Chapter 3

For me, that will be sufficient, Lily had said, but for Olmo it was not. During the remaining months of spring and throughout the long, hot summer almost every other night he flew the long distance down the iron tracks and then sat with her inside the safe and spacious hollow elm from midnight on through the small hours of the morning, while her parents hunted in the surrounding no man's land, bringing food home for their crippled daughter.

Crippled, yes, for while it soon became apparent that Lily's life was not in danger, as spring turned to summer and on either side of the iron tracks the corn in Barn Owl country bur-nished from yellow into golden brown, it became ever more apparent that Lily would never fly properly again. For a long time, she could not move at all, but as the blood red harvest moon appeared, she learned to hop down and move around with some agility on the ground surrounding the roots of the hollow tree. And as the flaming moon burnt out and faded, and the heavy scent of summer nights gave way to a touch of coming autumn in the now pungent early morning air, she even learned to propel herself through the air again.

'You could not really call it flying,' Olmo thought. But at least her blunted, crippled flight beat being earth bound, at any rate. He was particularly pleased with her when soon after har-vest time she flew with him for almost half a meadow's length before making a forced land-ing in the field of burnt stubble whose hunting rights belonged to the neighbouring farmland and therefore at night time to the Barn Owls.

But about poaching and trespassing, Olmo no longer cared. To feed himself, on his long noc-turnal journeys up and down the iron tracks to Lily's tree, he frequently hunted in the neigh-bouring meadows, taking whatever food that he could find. He knew now that the land be-longed to Bardic, who chose not to live but merely hunt there, preferring for his Bard Owl image the disused station in the heart of no man's land. But at this time Olmo had no fear of Bardic, or any other Barn Owl, and was therefore surprised when he overheard his parents talking — only for the second time in his entire life.

He overheard them on returning home after that last heady summer night mellowed with the first hint of autumn — the night that Lily learned to fly again. Arriving home when the sun was already high, he flew into the carriage silently through one of the broken windows and fell onto his perch on the luggage rack, hoping not to wake either his parents or his sister.

Lulled almost at once into a deep sleep after the fatigue of his long flight, Olmo was woken later by the close hunting cry of a Barn Owl — closer to his home than he'd ever heard before. 'That must be Bardic,' he thought, too befuddled by deep sleep to notice that the tone of the call was younger, more shrill and less mellifluous than the odd fruity cry that he'd heard emanating from the pompous poet who lived further down the line. His quick drift back into sleep was broken by the sound of voices whispering from his parents' perches further up the carriage.

'It must be him!' he heard his mother say, *sotto voce*, but with obvious concern.

'If it is, then he's very close!' he heard his father whisper grimly in reply.

'If he takes to hunting here in the winter, what will become of us?' his mother asked. 'Think of the appetite he will have, a young white owl like that!'

'He's probably just exploring the territory,' said Pietro, reassuringly.

'That's what any young male would do as soon as he'd arrived.'

'Now that there are two of them, Olmo is certain to be killed,' his mother said, panic now lifting her voice an octave higher and taking the volume well above a whisper.

'Speak softly!' Pietro said. 'How often have I told you not to be so negative — not to live in fear.'

'But can't you see the danger!' Rosalba insisted. 'Now that this older Bard Owl has a pupil, apprentice, student or whatever it is they call it, he will egg him on to kill Olmo, out of revenge. You must stop him flying down the line to see that little cripple. Maimed as she is, no good can ever come of it.'

'What do you mean?' asked Pietro, and listening, concealed up on his luggage rack, Olmo had the feeling that his father understood perfectly, but was playing for time.

'I mean, what use is it?' Rosalba persisted, not heeding the warning note of withdrawal in Pietro's voice. 'The little creature is lame and will never fly again. Think what would happen to Olmo if he mated with her! He would have to do everything. Do all the hunting, teach the chicks to fly and lose the rest of his life in a senseless sacrifice.'

'It's not Lily's fault, if she can't fly,' said Pietro in quiet, non committal tones.

'I know it's not her fault. But it isn't Olmo's either. He saved her life — surely that should be enough? I don't want to see him sacrifice himself for the first young female he's ever come across.'

'And why should you think he wants to?' asked Pietro, seeming to withdraw still further within himself.

‘Oh well, we all know what you males are like!’ exclaimed Rosalba, having now quite forgotten that she should be talking in a whisper. ‘I shouldn’t be surprised if they haven’t already done it — sitting up in that hollow tree, just the two of them, for half the night. What her parents are thinking of, I can’t imagine. Just putting temptation in their way, that’s what I call it. But then I don’t suppose that you can blame them. I mean, how is their crippled little Lily ever going to find another mate?’

‘I don’t think Olmo has the urge for her,’ said Pietro, again very quietly. ‘I think that he wants her to get better, and also that he needs to talk to a young female owl of his own age.’

‘That’s romantic nonsense!’ Rosalba said. ‘For a male the urge is the urge. It is the urge and nothing else.’

‘If only you knew how wrong you were,’ replied Pietro, after a long pause during which the abandoned railway carriage was drowned in an Indian summer blaze of sunlight. ‘Male owls think of many things, other than females,’ Pietro continued, after a brief pause for reflection and to check any volume or passion in his voice that might wake either Olmo or Eda from the morning sleep of innocence which he in his own youth had briefly known and which he still remembered as the purest time, however poverty stricken, in the life of any owl.

‘What, for example?’ Rosalba demanded. ‘The old language, I suppose.’

‘The old languages!’ Pietro replied, unable to suppress a rising note of irritation in his voice. ‘How often do I have to tell you there are two. One from the ancient times and secondly a vernacular version which devolved from it later!’

‘What does it matter?’ hissed Rosalba, keeping her voice down now only by a supreme effort of will. ‘What does it matter to Olmo or to Eda whether there are one or two old languages when you can’t speak either of them here. What does the old country matter any more, when all of us were born here?’

‘It is a question of identity,’ said Pietro, having recovered his calm and dignity and now speaking very quietly.

‘Identity!’ Rosalba exclaimed bitterly. ‘You know we can never return to the old country. Whatever identity we have must be rooted here, in no man’s land. And in my experience, all young male owls think about is hunting, food and mating. And fighting, too! That’s why I want you to forbid him to fly back down the line and see that little cripple.’

‘I can’t do that,’ said Pietro, calmly. ‘I can advise him, and so can you, but if he is to grow up and survive in this ever changing world, then first of all he must learn to make his own decisions.’

‘Shall I tell you what will happen if we let him make his own decisions?’

‘Tell me!’ said Pietro, who had been hunting all night and now longed for rest as the pre noon sunlight flooded through the carriage and blinded his ever weakening eyes.’

‘Two things can happen. One, he will be killed by that sorcerer’s apprentice. Two, he will ruin his life by mating with the little cripple. As his parents, we must take responsibility. I warn you, Pietro, if you don’t tell him tomorrow night, I will!’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said Pietro, wearily. ‘Now, for the Great God Bird’s sake, let me get some rest.’

Though the sun had topped its noon day height by the time his parents ceased to talk and slept, for Olmo there was to be no such sweet release. For the second time in his young life he stayed awake late into the afternoon, deeply troubled by the things he’d overheard. Why, or from where, had his mother got this ridiculous notion that he might mate with Lily — simply because he had heard the cry for help and helped to save her life?

Worse still though, why should he be afraid of Bardic’s apprentice? If Barn Owls were allowed to overflow from their rich farms and meadows to hunt in this narrow stretch of no man’s land, then what future hope would there be for young aliens or immigrants like him? Where would they go — back to the old country? His mother had said that this was impossible, but why? If their ancestors had made the journey, less than a hundred springs before, then why could they not fly back again?

Olmo was truly shocked by what he had heard his mother say, but about one thing he was certain she was right. The truth, as they perceived it, should now be told to him. The information, such as it was, should be made available. Then — as Pietro had rightly said — he could and would be able to make his own decisions.

As he slept at last, with these questions still burning in his mind, Olmo resolved to confront his father at twilight and if no satisfactory answers were forthcoming, to leave home and to live either close to Lily — perhaps sleeping on the ground in the manner of the Short Eared, nomad owls — or else to take up residence in the abandoned shack which had once been his secret hideout.

And it was here that he flew with Pietro, as twilight dimmed the last of the burning summer light. To Olmo’s relief it had not been necessary to challenge his father, who had been sitting perched on the luggage rack opposite to him, waiting for his son to surface from his short, belated sleep.

‘Shall we talk?’ asked Pietro, though from the tone of his voice this came over much less as a question than an order.

‘Yes, but where?’ Olmo said, having no desire for his mother to overhear whatever might pass between them.

‘Anywhere you like!’

‘Will you follow me?’ Olmo asked, having hesitated only for a second.

‘Of course,’ Pietro replied. ‘As I said, anywhere you like!’

In spite of the still lingering anger at what he’d overheard, Olmo was impressed by the calm and sturdy way in which his father flew beside him, never once pausing or questioning as they left their central strip of no man’s land and flew into the corner of the wedge which penetrated deep into surrounding Barn Owl country and bordered on the sloping woods where the dreaded Tawnies lived.

When they had both perched on the roof of the crumbling shack, Olmo glanced sideways to gauge his father’s reaction to the secret place which had so terrified his sister Eda. To his relief, Pietro showed no fear, but merely gazed calmly in front of him, watching the sun sink as the day died high above them in the forbidden woods.

‘Before you start, I have to tell you that I overheard what you and mother said, last night — or most of it, at any rate,’ Olmo blurted out, by way of a beginning.

‘I’m sorry,’ Pietro said, after looking at his son and pausing for a few moments in reflection.

‘I’m sorry, too,’ said Olmo. ‘I have to tell you that I wasn’t at all happy at what I heard.’

‘You wouldn’t be!’ said Pietro, cryptically. ‘However, you must remember that your mother is concerned about you. It is concern for your well being that makes her talk like that. Most females tend to fuss. It is endemic in their nature.’

‘She fusses too much!’ retorted Olmo. ‘I mean, do you really think Bardic’s apprentice means to kill me?’

‘He might,’ answered Pietro, calmly. ‘But I should think it most unlikely. It is rare for Barn Owls to attack us, even when we trespass on their territory. Tawnies are different, of course. If you went up into these woods, and if one of them caught you, he would warn you only once. The next time he would kill you. And some of the more primitive ones wouldn’t even bother with the warning.’

‘Why can’t we go home again?’ asked Olmo, suddenly changing the subject. ‘Why do we have to stay here as aliens, despised and held in contempt by both Barn Owls and Tawnies?’

‘Ah!’ said Pietro, sighing as he switched his gaze from the rolling woods and stared out over the Barn Owl meadow land where rich pastures stretched out enticingly below them. ‘That is a long story,’ he added, after another pause.

‘It may be long, but I want to hear it — all of it,’ said Olmo. ‘But before you tell me, I want you to inform my mother that I have no intention of mating with Lily. Not because she is a cripple, but because I don’t feel the urge for her.’

‘Why not tell her yourself?’ asked Pietro, quietly.

‘Because I don’t want to discuss it with her. I don’t want that kind of conflict. In fact — to avoid it — I’m thinking of leaving home.’

‘Well, in many ways it’s time you did!’ said Pietro, much to his son’s surprise. ‘Tell me, where would you intend to live?’

‘Here, perhaps,’ said Olmo, ‘or else near Lily’s hollow tree.’

‘Where, near her hollow tree?’

‘Oh, somewhere on the ground. I could camp out, like the Short Eared Owls.’

‘That’s not a good idea. You would probably be killed.’

‘By what?’

‘By a sparrow hawk, or perhaps a stoat. Some creature of the day would get you while you slept.’

‘Then how do the nomads manage it?’ asked Olmo. ‘They sleep well wherever the night finds them. If they can do it, why can’t I?’

‘Because you don’t have their experience,’ said Pietro. ‘You’re not a nomad, or media bird and you lack their centuries of practice.’

‘Then what about here, inside this shack?’ asked Olmo, nodding down to indicate a gap in the roof, through which the dilapidated interior could be viewed.

‘This would be safer,’ Pietro conceded. ‘But in a long cold winter you might have problems with your Barn Owl neighbours, or with the Tawnies up there in the woods.’

‘But this is no man’s land!’ protested Olmo. ‘And no man’s land belongs to us.’

‘No man’s land belongs to no one!’ Pietro said. ‘To no man and to no owl. So any creature may use it, if he can.’

‘But that’s not fair. If we Little Owls share no man’s land, why can’t the Barn Owls and the Tawnies share their rich wood and meadow land with us?’

‘Because owls don’t share,’ said Pietro. ‘That is something you must learn as you grow up.’

‘But we share the stretch of land beside the iron tracks. We share it with other Little Owls. Why can’t the other species share with us?’

‘Because we are aliens,’ Pietro said. ‘Because, although we are an older species, we came to this country long after the other types of owl. That’s why they don’t want us. That’s why they despise us and hold us in contempt. To them, we are a menace.’

‘Then why don’t we go back?’ demanded Olmo. ‘I asked you that before. If no one wants us here, and other owls won’t share, why don’t we go back to the old country, where we belong?’

‘We can’t,’ said Pietro, with a slow shake of his head. ‘We can’t go back.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, for one thing, no one remembers exactly where it is. Except that it’s a long, long way from here, far across the salty waters.’

‘How far?’ enquired Olmo, wondering yet again at how easy it had been to persuade Pietro to fly with him to this secret hideout and also at how relaxed his father seemed to be in this exposed and far flung outpost of their territory.

‘Nobody knows exactly how far it is. Some say four thousand meadows’ distance. Some say six.’

‘Well, that’s easy to work out,’ said Olmo eagerly. ‘Allowing time for setting up camp at sunrise, we could easily cover forty meadows distance in one night. So in one season we could travel over three thousand meadows’ distance. In two seasons, at the most, we would be there. If we left in the spring, we would arrive — at the latest — in the early autumn, reclaim our old territories and settle into them before the frost and snows of winter.’

‘Yours has been the dream of many an independent minded Little Owl since the time our ancestors first settled here. Only I’m sorry to tell you, my son, it must remain a dream!’

‘But why? Two seasons, that’s all that it would take. In two seasons we could fly there and live among our own woods and meadows. We could look upon the beauty of the cherry blossom and inhale the incense of wild rosemary and thyme. We could hunt and eat whatever food we wanted, without fear of the bigger owls who fly by night. We could live in our own land, and at last be free!’

Olmo paused at this point, partly to draw breath and partly because he was astonished by his own budding eloquence. For the first time in his life he realised that he liked his own choice of words and, above all, the sound of his own voice. Of this, he was a little ashamed and also suspected that one day it might get him into trouble, but at the same time he knew he couldn’t help it.

‘We can’t go back!’ his father repeated, in a tone that was blunt and flat. ‘We can’t go back because the place where we live now is an island.’

‘What is an island?’

‘I’ve told you. It is a place entirely surrounded by the salty waters — what they call the sea. It’s much too vast — much too wide and long to fly across. And then, before you come to the

old country, there is a great expanse of land to travel over. Some of this is wild country, where the ogre owl still lives. And after crossing this territory there are high mountains to fly over. A massive range of peaks where even in summer there is still snow. No Little Owl would ever have the stamina or flight power to undertake a journey of that kind.'

For some moments Olmo stared at his father, struggling to come to terms with what he had been told. For some time, Pietro held his gaze and then turned his head once more and looked up through the darkness at the Tawny hills that rose up into the night above them.

'But how did we get here in the first place, if no Little Owl could fly across the sea and across the snow capped mountains?' Olmo asked eventually.

'In a way I'm glad you asked me that. And in a way I'm sorry.'

'Why glad?'

'Because it shows you have a brain. It shows you can connect. You can relate one thing to another. In order to survive, one must connect. But not all owls can, I'm afraid.'

'And why are you sorry that I asked the question?'

'Because I'm afraid that the answer may distress you.' Pietro paused at this point and looked hard at his son, as if attempting to assess whether the time had come, whether Olmo was really mature enough to know the truth. 'There are several theories,' Pietro continued, after a moment's pause. 'First I will tell you what I perceive to be the truth. Then we can discuss the other hypotheses and you can decide which version of our history suits you best.'

'To me, only the truth matters,' Olmo said. 'I'm not interested in empty theories.'

'Ah, but the truth is always relative,' replied Pietro, speaking slowly as he prepared himself for the difficult explanation that lay ahead. 'You see, true history does not in fact exist. We merely make it up from time to time to suit ourselves.'

'That I don't believe,' replied Olmo, surprised by the passion of his own convictions. 'There can only be one truth about the past. Owls may distort the truth, or simply not remember exactly what happened. But there must be a factual truth and that is what I want to hear!'

'As you grow older, you will understand,' replied his father patiently. 'For the moment, we will begin with what I perceive of as the truth. And the sad fact of it is I believe that in the first place we were brought here by man.'

'By man?'

'By man. Some of our ancestors were captured in the old country and then brought here by human beings.'

Olmo stared at his father for a moment. 'I don't believe it,' he said then, on impulse rather than reflection.

‘You don’t need to believe it,’ said Pietro, with a weary little shrug. ‘As I said, you can choose whichever version of the truth suits you best.’

‘But why would they do it? And how could they do it?’ Olmo asked. ‘How could men capture a living owl — no, two live owls at least — and then bring them across the snow capped mountains and across the great salty waters that you spoke about. If it is impossible for us to travel that far — if it is difficult for us, it must be impossible for them. They can’t even fly!’

‘No, but they have man made means of transport,’ Pietro said. ‘Like the zoomerangs that used to move up and down our iron tracks, or the smaller vehicles that go along the roads. Apparently they have similar things in which they can sail across the salty waters. And also, it is not certain that they cannot fly. Some say they control those great, lifeless birds we see high above us in the sky. Some say they create these huge artificial birds and then fly about inside their bellies. If this is true, men could cover more distance in one day than we could travel in two seasons. And as far as capturing us in the first place, one version of history has it that our ancestors were taken as fledglings from the nest.’

‘But how could the chicks have survived a journey of that kind?’

‘If they were in a warm place and well fed, they would survive,’ said Franco, with a little shrug. ‘Men have been known to feed owls before, you know.’

‘But why?’ demanded Olmo, whose inner self still rejected this version of their origins. ‘Why would men want to introduce Little Owls to this island when there were none here before?’

‘Who knows?’ replied his father, with another shrug. ‘They don’t eat us, that’s for sure, any more than we eat them. But about men, you must remember this. They are not all the same, any more than we Little Owls are all the same, or Barn Owls and Tawnies are all the same. One theory is that some of them wanted to study our behaviour patterns — to see how we would survive in a new environment.’

‘But that’s ridiculous!’ protested Olmo. ‘You’ve always taught me that man was one of the greatest natural dangers to our species.’

‘Some men, not all. I’ve told you, there have been cases of men feeding owls, though many more, of course, of killing them. And remember, there must be different species of men. We know this because we know that, like owls, they sometimes fight among themselves.’

‘What are the other theories about our origins?’

‘Some say we flew here. This I can’t believe, for the reasons I have already given.’

‘And what do others say?’

‘Others say we have lived here on this island since the beginning of time. They say we were here long before the Barn Owls came into being and that we are an older species even than

the Tawnies. According to this theory, large colonies of us existed here, but most were killed or driven from their homes by the two newer species, who needed space and, of course, also needed some of the food we eat. So, after the initial massacres, only very few families survived and these were obliged to live for centuries in hidden pockets, or remote parts of no man's land where no other owls ever flew. The theory is that we began to spread again with the decline of the Barn Owl and day time raptors — the great hawks and falcons, such as the buzzard, the kite and the deadly peregrine.'

'I like that theory better,' Olmo said. 'It is sad, but much more dignified than the idea that we were brought here artificially, by man.'

'Of course it's more dignified! That's why some owls like to believe it. They like to believe it in the same way that your mother and your sister believe in the Great God Bird in the sky. But in my opinion, it is an illusion. Something that gives them comfort, and that is all.'

'Are you sure?' Olmo enquired.

'I have told you, no one can be sure. Each owl must interpret — or invent again his own version of the truth. But I base my beliefs on history and language. Not on wishful thinking.'

'Yet you have taught me that we have no way of recording history, except by word of mouth!'

'That is why I believe we were brought here from the old country, by man. Otherwise, how could our ancestors have learned the old languages?'

Olmo stared up at the ascending moon and thought carefully for a while before he spoke.'

'Tell me, father,' he asked eventually. 'Do none of the local owls speak either of our two old languages?'

This time it was Pietro's turn to pause. 'That is a very interesting question,' he replied, eventually.

'Why?'

'Because some do have a few words of both. But that is easily explained by the fact that the Barn Owls — in particular — have experts who study us. So in the beginning, when our ancestors first came, these experts must have picked up some of our vocabulary.'

'But you told me that the older of the two languages hadn't been used for more than five hundred springs. How could these Barn Owls have learned something that was no longer spoken?'

Pietro paused, to look up at the night sky and then glanced back at Olmo, who began to form the impression that his father was hiding something. Frustrated, Olmo decided to challenge him.

‘What if the third theory were correct?’ he asked. ‘What if you were wrong and we really had lived here many million springs ago, before the Tawny and the Barn Owl came into being? In that case, before attempting to exterminate us, they would have learned some of the old language. Or even more likely, it might have been the first real language that they spoke.’

‘You may believe that, if you wish,’ his father said, and though he sounded calm enough Olmo could tell that he was angry because of the hackled feathers on his neck. ‘I have told you,’ Pietro continued. ‘Owls believe what they want to believe. And if they are clever, they can always find a way of proving it.’

‘Well, what other explanation could there be?’ insisted Olmo. ‘How else could the Barn Owls and the Tawnies have learned any words of the ancient language?’

‘Perhaps from owls like me.’

‘Owls like you?’

‘Yes. Owls who still try to remember both of them — the ancient one and the one our ancestors used when they first came here.’

As the half moon rose still higher and shed its pale glow on the roof of the shack where father and son perched side by side, Olmo suddenly saw the light and understood the reasons for his father’s prevarication.

‘You’ve done it, haven’t you?’ he exclaimed in triumph. ‘You’ve taught a Barn Owl the rudiments of the old language — in the way you’ve been trying to teach me!’

‘Only one. Once I did teach one,’ Pietro confessed. ‘But I dare say the same sort of thing has been going on since we first came here. I mean, those of us with a passion for the old languages can’t be expected to suppress it!’

‘Who is, or was this Barn Owl?’ demanded Olmo, delighted to have guessed his father’s secret.

‘Beak Poke. An Owl Owl. One of the experts I told you about.’

‘An Owl Owl?’

‘Yes, they have a council with ten or twelve members. Each one is a specialist and must teach his subject to successive generations.’

‘You mean like the Bard Owl?’

‘Precisely. The Bard Owl teaches music and singing. The Owl Owl is obviously the expert on other owls. They also have a War Owl, a History Owl, a Geography Owl, a Man Owl and so on.’

‘And you taught this Owl Owl the old language?’

‘Only bits of it. He knew some already.’

‘And does my mother know about this?’

‘Of course not. And you mustn’t mention it. Rosalba has always considered my passion for the old languages to be a waste of time. If she knew about my friendship with Beak Poke, she would take it as further proof that my hobby — as she calls it — is not only negative, but also dangerous.’

‘Is it dangerous?’ asked Olmo, who felt that for the first time in his life he was getting to know his father well.

‘Of course not! At least, not as far as Beak Poke is concerned. He is a kind, learned old bird, but decrepit.’

‘He hasn’t long to live?’

‘I shouldn’t think so, no.’

‘I would like to meet him before he dies!’

‘That is your prerogative,’ Pietro said. ‘All you need to do is to fly to his territory and seek him out. But I warn you that it is a dangerous journey for one so young and inexperienced — a journey from which you might never return.’

As if to underline Pietro’s warning the night air was split on a sudden by the hunting cry of a Barn owl. This time it was close — much closer than the one that petrified Olmo the first time he had heard it. Shocked by the vicinity of the creature, Olmo turned instinctively to his father expecting to see his own fear mirrored in the eyes of the older owl. To his surprise, Pietro remained calmly perched on his rafter in the roof of the shack. He had fractionally raised his eyebrows at the Barn Owl’s call, but nothing more.

‘Do you think he’s sensed our presence?’ whispered Olmo, after a few seconds silence that seemed like eternity to him.

‘Probably,’ replied Pietro, not bothering to lower his voice. ‘He’s probably just killed something in the meadow that borders on this wedge of no man’s land.’

‘Will he attack?’ asked Olmo, still speaking in a whisper.

‘I shouldn’t think so. If he does, there are two of us. We can defend ourselves.’

Olmo was surprised and impressed by his father’s calm, unruffled manner. ‘If I am to make this long and dangerous journey, I must come to terms with fear, as he has done,’ he thought as the two Little Owls sat side by side waiting for the big white bird to attack them or else to fly away again. Presently there was another cry, but this time from much farther away, deep in the heart of the Barn Owl farm and meadow land. The danger had passed and as it did so Olmo made a great resolve.

‘I shall make this dangerous journey,’ he announced, turning to his father as he spoke. ‘I shall fly to seek out Beak Poke, the sage, and when I return I shall have conquered fear!’

‘That would be a pity,’ said Pietro, surprising his son for the third time that night. ‘The only fearless owls are idiots. Fear tells us when to fight, when to escape and when to hide. Without it no creature can survive. Remember that, my son, when you make your first long journey. Courage may take you far, but only a healthy respect for fear will help to bring you home again.’